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ABSTRACT

Mission statements can provide a useful vehicle to communicate the purposes, goals, and objectives for functional units within organizations. This paper studied the extent to which institutional research offices utilize mission statements to communicate office functions. These functions were identified through content analysis, using nine specific characteristics: internal reporting; planning support; external reporting; conducting research studies; data management; decision-making support; assessment support; data analysis; and policy information support. An e-mail survey of 167 managers and senior administrators at institutions in the Northeast was conducted; the response rate was 86 percent. Of these, 44 percent provided published mission statements, with other administrators indicating they would be developing such statements in the near future. The study suggests that mission statements of two-year colleges differ from those of four-year colleges, and that there are also differences in the statements of public versus private institutions. It is postulated that demands for public accountability might explain the greater presence of assessment-related functions in statements of public institutions. Among other differences, four-year institutions more frequently mention external reporting than do two-year colleges. The study cautions that actual activities of institutional research offices might not be congruent with their mission statements. (RH)

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Drexel University

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Abstract

Mission statements can provide a useful vehicle to communicate the purposes, goals, and objectives for functional units within organizations. To describe institutional research in higher education, a content analysis was performed on mission statements of institutional research offices within NEAIR. This paper presents the findings of the study.

Introduction

In a monograph publication for the Association for Institutional Research, Saupe (1990) defined institutional research (IR) as "research conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information which supports institutional planning, policy formation, and decision making" (p.1). Institutional research, according to Saupe, is a form of "action research" that often involves close interaction with institutional clients in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. Saupe describes additional responsibilities or tasks that may be assigned to the IR office "which need not be considered research on the institution" (p. 6), such as data collection and management for both internal and external reporting.

Several studies have described the tasks and functions of institutional research. Clemons and Nojan (1987) conducted a study of beliefs about institutional research among managers and senior administrators at 17 large, multi-campus, state-supported institutions. They found strong beliefs among senior administrators and IR managers that the functions of IR offices should include data collection, analysis, maintenance, and dissemination; state and federal reporting, policy-oriented research, defining institutional databases, projecting enrollment, and measuring outcomes.

Through an innovative approach, Boyles (1988) conducted a content analysis of IR position advertisements that were published in the "Chronicle of Higher Education" from 1970 to 1985 to describe, among other things, the responsibilities of positions within offices of institutional research. Boyles found the primary functions of IR during the 1970s were the collection, maintenance, and dissemination of information. During this period, the function of IR expanded to include various comparative studies and reporting to external agencies. By the late 1970s, the position advertisements began to include support for campus planning activities as a function of the IR office.

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Other studies have documented differences in the roles and tasks of IR offices on the basis of institutional characteristics, the size of the office, and its reporting location within the organization (Delaney, 1990; Harrington, 1995; Reichard, 1982; Volkwein, 1990). Reichard (1982), in a survey of AIR members, found that IR offices at doctoral-granting or comprehensive institutions were more involved in academic research studies while their counterparts at baccalaureate and two-year institutions were more involved in environmental analysis studies and outcomes assessment. In a research study of north east institutional research offices, Delaney (1990) found that IR offices at private institutions were more engaged than public institutions in advanced research projects, while public institution IR offices placed more importance on outcomes assessment. In addition, Delaney (1990) reported four-year institutions were more likely than two-year institutions to conduct research, planning and policy studies. In a separate study of north east offices of institutional research, Volkwein (1990) reported that two-year institutions were more actively involved in assessment processes than four-year institutions.

Mission statements can provide a communication vehicle to define the scope of operations and the purposes, goals, and objectives of organizational units. Mission statements have the potential to clarify interests, define core activities, and help to set priorities for functional units within organizations.

What is the mission of institutional research? Studies have been conducted in other functional units of higher education (Stearns and Borna, 1998), but the literature is bereft of such studies for offices of institutional research. The purpose of this study is to describe the functions of institutional research by reviewing the published mission statements of research offices. Other questions to be addressed include the extent to which mission statements exist for IR offices, and whether the content of mission statements varies by institutional characteristics.

Methodology

Content analysis is "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). Content analysis involves selecting a written message to be studied, developing categories for measurement, and measuring frequency of appearance of the categories by using coding rules. The definition of IR offered by Saupe (1990) and the description of IR tasks and functions documented in other research studies provided the "desired characteristics" for measurement. Mission statements were analyzed to determine the presence or absence of each of the following characteristics: planning support, decision making support, policy formation support, assessment support, conducting research studies, data management, data analysis, internal and external reporting. The following definitions or examples were used to measure the presence of each characteristic:

Planning Support: Examples included coordinating, facilitating, or providing information or analyses to support planning activities on the campus.

Decision making Support: Examples included providing information for decision making, supporting decision making, or informing decision making.

Policy formation support: Examples included policy analysis, providing data, information, or research for policy-related issues.

Assessment support: Examples included coordination for assessment, accountability, or self-study processes, or providing data analysis or research for these processes.

Conducting research studies: Examples included descriptions of specific types of research or analytical studies, such as student opinion research, survey research, or enrollment management research.

Data Management: Examples included references to database management systems, or the collection, organization, maintenance, or verification of data.

Data analysis: References to the analysis or interpretation of data.

External reporting: Examples included federal or state reporting, providing data for guidebook or other external organizations.

Internal reporting: Examples included presentation of data, publication of reports, dissemination of data or information to constituencies within the institution.

The population for this study included research offices at institutions within the north east region. The 1998 NEAIR membership roster provided the sample for the study. Institutions selected for the study included those with "research" or "analysis" in the office title. An email survey was sent to one person from each institution, typically the director of institutional research. The email survey asked the respondent to identify the title of the office, whether the office had a published mission statement and, if so, to provide the mission statement for content analysis. Of 179 possible institutions, only 167 were eventually included in the study. The remaining 12 institutions were not included in the study because the office title did not include research or analysis (such as Registrar) or because of bad email addresses.

Results

Table 1 provides the response rate and availability of published mission statements by institutional control and level. Overall, 86% of the institutions responded to the survey, representing 86% of the public and 87% of the private institutions from the original sample. By level, 87% of the four-year institutions and 83% of the two-year institutions responded to the survey.

Of those who responded, 44% of the institutions provided published mission statements for their IR offices. Four-year institutions were slightly more likely to have published mission statements as compared to two-year institutions, 45% and 40% respectively.

Table 1
Response Rates and Frequency of Mission Statements
By Institutional Control and Level

	N	% Responding	Number with Mission Statements	% with Mission Statements (of those responding)
Combined	167	86%	63	44%
Public	90	86%	34	44%
Private	77	87%	29	43%
4 year	119	87%	47	45%
2 year	48	83%	16	40%

The office titles of those institutions providing mission statements are shown in Table 2. About half of the offices were titled as "institutional research". Another 29% of the institutions included "planning" in the office title with institutional research. Other variations incorporated "assessment" in the title of the office.

Table 2
Frequency of Office Titles

Office Title	N	%
Assessment & Institutional Research	2	3%
Institutional Assessment & Research	1	2%
Institutional Planning & Analysis	1	2%
Institutional Research	30	48%
Institutional Research & Academic Planning	1	2%
Institutional Research & Analysis	1	2%
Institutional Research & Assessment	1	2%
Institutional Research & Budget	1	2%
Institutional Research & Planning	10	16%
Planning & Institutional Research	7	11%
Planning & Research	2	3%
Planning, Assessment, & Research	1	2%
Planning, Assessment, Research, & Academic Support	1	2%
Planning, Research, & Grants Management	1	2%
Research	1	2%
Research & Planning	1	2%
Strategic Planning & Institutional Research	1	2%
Total Offices	63	100%

Table 3 presents the frequency of the desired characteristics found through the content analysis of the mission statements. The most frequently occurring functions for institutional research described in the mission statements were internal reporting (92%), planning support (76%), external reporting (67%), and conducting research studies (62%). Over half of the mission statements included references to data management (57%) and providing support for assessment activities (56%) and decision making (56%). The least frequently mentioned functions of IR in the mission statements were data analysis (40%) and support for policy formation (38%).

Table 3
Proportion of Mission Statements Exhibiting Desired Characteristics

	Level		Control		Combined
Characteristic	4-year (N=47)	2-year (N=16)	Public (N=34)	Private (N=29)	(N=63)
Internal reporting	89%	100%	97%	86%	92%
Planning support	74%	81%	76%	76%	76%
External reporting	79%	31%	65%	69%	67%
Conduct research studies	70%	38%	47%	79%	62%
Data management	57%	56%	68%	45%	57%
Decision making support	55%	56%	56%	55%	56%
Assessment support	45%	88%	71%	38%	56%
Data analysis	34%	56%	32%	48%	40%
Policy formation support	43%	25%	35%	41%	38%

Several statistical differences were found in the content of mission statements on the basis of institutional level and control. The mission statements of IR offices at two-year institutions were more likely than four-year institution mission statements to describe support for assessment activities as an office function ($X^2 = 8.86$, $p<.01$). The mission statements of research offices at four-year institutions, on the other hand, were more likely to describe specific research studies ($X^2 = 5.42$, $p<.02$) and external reporting ($X^2=12.1$, $p<.01$) as functions of institutional research.

In comparing mission statements by institutional control, the mission statements of the IR offices at public institutions were more likely than mission statements at private institutions to include the function of support for assessment ($X^2=6.76$, $p<.01$). The mission statements of IR offices at private institutions were more likely to include references to specific research efforts ($X^2 =6.90$, $p<.01$).

For those mission statements that included types of research studies, Table 4 provides the areas of research conducted by those offices. Of those mission statements that included references to research activities, 57% described specific research efforts for assessment-related

activities. Examples of the assessment-related research studies included surveys of student outcomes and evaluation studies for assessing institutional effectiveness.

Other types of research studies frequently described in the mission statements included student opinion research (32%), and academic research (30%). About 24% of the mission statements specifically referenced research studies that would broadly fall into the categories of enrollment, benchmarking, or environmental scanning.

Research studies for student outcomes and assessment were significantly more frequently included in the IR mission statements of two-year institutions compared to four-year institutions (X^2=5.48, p<.02). In addition, the mission statements of IR offices at two-year institutions included references to environmental research studies significantly more often than four-year institutions (X^2 =6.26, p<.02).

Table 4
Types of Research Studies

	Level		Control		Combined
Area of Research	4-year (N=33)	2-year (N=6)	Public (N=16)	Private (N=23)	(N=39)
Assessment	48%	100%	88%	35%	57%
Student opinion	33%	17%	25%	35%	32%
Academic (faculty, workload)	30%	33%	50%	17%	30%
Enrollment	21%	33%	38%	13%	24%
Benchmarking	24%	17%	19%	26%	24%
Environmental scanning	18%	67%	31%	22%	24%
Campus issues	24%	0%	13%	26%	22%
Survey research	24%	0%	19%	22%	22%
Policy	21%	17%	25%	17%	22%
Planning	18%	17%	19%	17%	19%
Finance	12%	33%	25%	9%	16%
Decision making	12%	17%	19%	9%	14%
Staffing	6%	0%	6%	4%	5%
Facilities	3%	0%	6%	0%	3%

In comparing mission statements by institutional control, the mission statements of IR offices in public institutions were more likely than private institutions to describe assessment-related research studies (X^2 =10.67, p<.001). The mission statements from IR offices at public institutions were more likely than private institutions to include descriptions of academic-related research activities (X^2 =4.71, p<.03).

Discussion

The purposes for this study were to determine the extent to which institutional research offices utilize mission statements to communicate office functions and tasks and to identify those functions and tasks through content analysis. The use of mission statements as a communication vehicle to define tasks and functions appears to be an established practice among research offices. Nearly half of the respondents surveyed provided mission statements for analysis. Moreover, other office directors indicated through private email that they would be developing mission statements for their offices in the near future.

The results of this study suggest that the tasks and functions for institutional research are consistent with the description of institutional research advanced by Saupe (1990). The majority of mission statements for research offices reviewed through content analysis described the IR functions of support for institutional planning and decision making, assessment, conducting research, data management, and providing information to internal and external constituencies. To a lesser degree, the mission statements for institutional research offices also referred to the responsibilities for data analysis and support for policy formation decisions.

Prior studies have reported differences in the tasks and functions performed by research offices based on institutional characteristics (Delaney, 1990; Reichard, 1982; Volkwein, 1990). Results of this study suggest that mission statements for institutional research also vary based on institutional characteristics. The mission statements of research offices at two-year colleges more frequently describe involvement in assessment-related processes and research, consistent with the findings from previous studies. Demands for public accountability may explain the greater presence of assessment-related functions in the IR mission statements of public versus private institutions.

The mission statements of IR offices at four-year institutions more frequently mention external reporting as compared to the two-year colleges. The inundation of guidebook and ranking surveys that often land in the IR offices of four-year institutions may explain why nearly 80% of the mission statements of four-year institutions describe external reporting as a function of institutional research.

The types of studies conducted by institutional research offices also vary by institutional characteristics. The IR mission statements of two-year institutions reinforce the findings of prior research studies that reported that two-year institutions were more likely to conduct assessment and environmental scanning research. Results of the content analysis of IR mission statements also demonstrated a greater frequency of assessment-related research at public institutions.

It should be noted that this study describes the content of published mission statements and does not necessarily reflect the actual activities of IR offices. An IR office may be conducting research in specific areas but did not include references to that research in their mission statement. Future research efforts may seek to measure the congruency between the functions and tasks described in mission statements and actual activities conducted through the institutional research office.

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